



[Tristan and Isolde](#) by [Welsh National Opera](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) June 2012

A Wagner opera production is always an event unmatched by any other. The passion displayed on stage is generally reflected by the audience. Perhaps no other opera produces greater feeling than *Tristan and Isolde*.

Based on the 13th Century poem of Tristan by Gottfried von Strassburg, Wagner took one section of the story and rewrote it. The result was an opera that casts a giant shadow over all aspects of musical composition, even to this very day. As the conductor of this performance says in the programme notes "With its expansion of harmony, its achievement of chromatic independence, and its 'emancipation of dissonance', *Tristan* ultimately leads the way to atonality and to twelve-tone composition." We can certainly feel the hand of Wagner's *Tristan* on the early Schoenberg and throughout Mahler's works.

From the outset, Wagner challenged the perceptions of music of the time that still resonate. The sensual *Prelude* opens with the famous 'Tristan chord'; one of the most controversial chords in musical history (see, eg: [The Tristan Chord in Context](#) L. Hofmann-Engl London, UK). It is said that the Tristan Chord was born out of Wagner's desire to prolong a feeling of grief and sorrow that runs throughout this opera, and, perhaps, a response to his own love life.



The Conductor Lothar Koenigs proves himself to be an outstanding interpreter of Wagner. The pace of the *Prelude* is executed with so much care; the notes of the *Tristan* Chord drawn out to emphasise their emotional and sexual impact. He avoids the crassness that seems to impose itself on concert versions, whilst the orchestra respond in the same manner: every note could be clearly heard, even when, towards its conclusion, the

Prelude
threatens chaos.

As with the composer himself, there is still something morally repugnant about Wagner's version of the Tristan legend. The opera begins on board a ship where Tristan is bringing back the Irish King's daughter, Isolde, who is to marry the King of Cornwall, Marke, in an arrangement designed to heal the rift between the two kingdoms. Tristan and Isolde had met before when she, a renowned practitioner in healing, tended to his wounds from a fight in which he had killed

the Irish emissary Morold, who had been Isolde's betrothed.

Act One opens with Isolde, reclining on-board a ship whilst a sailor sings of the love he has left behind (*Westwärtsschweift der Blick*). Isolde is not happy about the marital arrangement and looks for every excuse to express her anger. Yet in her first aria, *Entartet Geschlecht! Unwert der Ahnen*, her hatred for Cornwall and its people, is expressed almost tenderly and sets the tone for this great opera in that every action is guided by passion. Isolde is doted on by her handmaiden, Brangäne, who seems to pander to her histrionics brought on by her impending fate (*Luft! Luft! Mir erstickt das Herz! Öffne! Öffne dort weit!*).

When Tristan does appear, Isolde views him with contempt (*Was hältst du von dem Knechte?*). She orders Brangäne to summon Tristan to her, but Tristan refuses, making the excuse that he must do his duty in delivering Isolde to his King. Isolde is furious that he refuses to come to her. She recounts their previous meeting and how she saved his life when she could have easily killed him (*Den hab ich wohl vernommen, kein Wort, das mir entging*) ending with the admission that she spared him when he gazed into her eyes (*er sah mir in die Augen*). Brangäne tries to placate Isolde (*O Süsse! Traute!*). Isolde will not be pacified and reaches for her box of potions pulling out one bottle as the antidote to 'evil poisons' (*Balsam hier; für böse Gifte Gegengift*) though Brangäne believes that Isolde has the wrong potion.

One of Tristan's henchman, Kurwenal, is sent to summon the women to prepare for landing (*Auf*

! Auf! Ihr Frauen!

). When he leaves Isolde tells Brangäne to prepare the draught in a goblet that both she and Tristan shall drink from. Brangäne is confused, and Isolde berates her as faithless, so the servant is forced to carry out the order. When Tristan does appear before Isolde he tries to make her understand that he could not obey her previous command out of duty to his King. Whilst he believes that he has atoned for the killing of Morold, Isolde tells him that he has not made his peace with her and that he should make his atonement by drinking a toast of reconciliation. Tristan drinks from the goblet and Isolde snatches it from him to drink from it also. Instead of the expected death the pair gaze into each other's eyes, and passionately embrace, as they are joined by the ship's crew, hailing the arrival to Cornwall.

The staging itself was simple but effective. Nothing should really detract from the power of the music or the players and singers. This minimalist approach to set designs for Wagner's operas is quite common, but Yannis Kokkos' staging has a power of its own that did more than act as a backdrop to this opera yet did not impact. The sharp angles, representing the ship, seemed to impose a sense of containment on the onstage cast, bringing a feeling of intimacy to the whole first act.

In Act Two a hunt is underway. Brangäne tries to warn Isolde of Melot, Tristan's closest friend. She believes that the hunt was organised by Melot to allow the lovers an opportunity to meet. Brangäne suspects a treacherous reason behind the hunt (*Was mir ihn verdächtig, macht dir ihn teuer!*) and opposes her mistresses' demand to take down the torch that is burning as a signal for Tristan to come to Isolde.

When Tristan arrives the couple declare their love for each other (*Himmelhöchstes Weltentrücken!*). Brangäne, who has been keeping watch (*Einsam wachend in der Nacht*

), announces that day is breaking. Suddenly she screams as King Mark, Melot, Kurwenal and Courtiers arrive to discover Tristan and Isolde in a passionate embrace. Brangäne's suspicions were correct as Melot turns to the King for acknowledgement (

Das sollst du, Herr, mir sagen, ob ich ihn recht verklagt?

). The King is shocked to find that his most trusted knight has betrayed him.

Mir dies? Dies, Tristan, mir?

Is one of the most wonderful moments in any Wagner opera. Within this one aria King Marke Wagner creates a character that we can feel something for. The King gives vent to his sense of betrayal. It is a deep sorrow mixed with a sense of pity. His bewilderment at such disloyalty is expressed by repeated questioning. Matthew Best, a leading Wagner singer, has one of the most effective bass voices I have heard, giving this aria a depth that few singers could match.

Tristan cannot answer the King, his only response is that he will leave Cornwall for his ancestral home, Kareol, on the coast of Brittany and he calls on Isolde to tell the King that she will follow him, whereupon Merlot calls him a traitor (*Verräter! Ha!*) and raises his sword. Tristan responds but seeing that it is his friend, he lowers his sword. Merlot strikes him and Tristan is wounded falling into the arms of Kurwenal.

Before the prelude to Act Three it was announced that Ann Petersen was suffering from a throat infection and the role of Isolde would be taken up by the Austrian soprano Anna-Katharina Behnke, for the Third Act. What was surprising was that Petersen sounded fantastic in the role and betrayed little hint that there was anything wrong. Wagner's works place great demand on singers, no greater is the role of Isolde. It requires an enormous amount of stamina as well as vocal ability. Petersen had already been on stage for nearly three hours. It is testament to her greatness as an artist that she could maintain such a pace, but also that she should concede the role before the Third Act, which contains one of the most beautiful and demanding arias in the world of opera.

Act Three opens with Tristan lying mortally wounded whilst Kurwenal, who has brought him to Brittany, watches over him. In the background a shepherd sits on a rock overlooking the sea and playing a mournful tune on his pipes. The shepherd asks Kurwenal about Tristan, Kurwenal, says that he will only wake to die (*Erwachte er, wär's doch nur um für immer zu verscheiden*) unless Isolde arrives to heal him. He tells the shepherd to keep watch and to pipe merrily should a ship approach.

Tristan is awakened by the music but is unaware of where he is. He is delirious and rails against the day (*Noch losch das Licht nicht aus, noch ward's nicht Nacht im Haus*) until Kurwenal reveals that he has sent for Isolde.

There follows an exchange between the fevered Tristan, who is grateful to his friend for bringing him to his home, and Kurwenal, who curses Love for the destruction of such an honourable man (*Hat dich der Fluch entführt?*). Yet his anger turns to joy when the shepherd pipes a joyful tune as a ship is spotted coming towards the shore. At the arrival of Isolde, Tristan, in his excited state, tears off his bandage (*Die mir die Wunde ewig schliesse, - sie naht wie ein Held*), and at this point Tristan dies.

A second ship lands on the shore carrying the King, Melot and other knights. King Marke regrets that there can be no reconciliation with Tristan (*Tot denn alles! Alles tot!*). But to Isolde, Tristan is not dead; he is transfigured, still smiling, softly and gently (*Mild und leise*). This is perhaps the most famous ending in opera.

Given that Behnke had been called in at a day's notice. It was an incredible and tense third act. Her final aria was sung with as much passion that Petersen had shown throughout the preceding acts, and although she is familiar with the role, to have stepped in at such short notice and delivered such a performance, was an incredible achievement.

Putting on a production of *Tristan And Isolde* of this magnitude is itself, a great triumph. The emotional investment of all the performers is there to be seen and heard. Ben Heppner's Tristan was outstanding, the equal of any of today's Heldenotenors. Simon Thorpe as Merlot brought a sense of dignity to this Iago-like character and Phillip Joll was ideal in the role of Kurwenal: the arrogant swaggerer of the first act and as the tender friend of the final act.

In *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner not only challenges the musical norms of his day with *Tristan and Isolde*, but also the morality of the time. Himself a libertarian, whose illicit relationship with Mathilde Wesendonck, wife of one of his patrons, was one of the scandals of the day, Wagner (pretentiously, perhaps) put love above everything else, including honour, and he makes this clear in *Tristan and Isolde*. In the cold light of day there is ugliness to such a hedonistic approach, yet everything about *Tristan and Isolde* cries out for understanding. The pure sensuality of the music and the singing draws you in like nothing else could. For the five hours this opera takes to perform, nothing else matters.

In the past I have seen a number of Wagner opera productions, but I have always been drawn to WNO productions. I think that the organisation provide some of the most assured, yet challenging, productions of Wagner's opus. This *Tristan and Isolde* is testament to that. WNO will be taking the concert opera version of [*Tristan and Isolde*](#)

to the Edinburgh International Festival in August where Jennifer Wilson will sing the role of Isolde, in a concert performance. If you are fortunate enough to get there, then this production promises to be a festival highlight.